POLITICS OF EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE HERDERSMEN INSURGENCY IN NIGERIA: THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF ISLAMISATION AGENDA

EZE, George Ogazi Mani (PhD)
(ORCID ID: https:// orcid.org/0009-0008-6765-6123)
georgeeze350@gmail.com. (+234) 803 867 1590; 0805 600 6284
Department of Mass Communication, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education,
Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Abstract
The debate over the herders–farmers conflict in Nigeria has transcended questions of land use, resource competition, and pastoralist migration to embrace broader discourses of religion, identity, and political control. Framed within the politics of epistemology, this study interrogates how knowledge about the herdersmen insurgency is constructed, circulated, and contested in the Nigerian public sphere, and how such narratives sustain or undermine the (im)possibility of an Islamisation agenda. While some perspectives situate the crisis within ecological degradation, population pressure, and governance failures, others interpret it as part of a deliberate attempt at religious domination and cultural homogenisation, especially in the predominantly Christian regions of the Middle Belt and the South. This paper critically examines media reports, political speeches, policy documents, and secondary literature between 2015 and 2024 to deconstruct the epistemic frames through which the insurgency is understood. Drawing on postcolonial theory and discourse analysis, the study highlights how competing narratives of jihad, victimhood, national security, and communal survival interact with political agendas and historical grievances. The findings reveal that the Islamisation thesis, though epistemically potent, is entangled with colonial legacies of land demarcation, elite manipulation of identity politics, and the instrumentalisation of religion for political legitimacy. The paper concludes that while the insurgency reflects deep structural contradictions in governance and resource management, framing it solely as an Islamisation agenda risks oversimplification and further polarisation. Rather than waiting for perfect conditions, we must build knowledge systems that sincerely unite security concerns with respect for cultural diversity and commitment to living together with shared responsibility for future generations.

Keywords: Epistemology, Herdersmen Insurgency, Islamisation Agenda, Identity Politics

Introduction

The herders–farmers conflict in Nigeria has become one of the most contentious and polarising security challenges in contemporary Africa.

What initially appeared to be a struggle over access to land, water, and grazing routes has in recent years assumed broader dimensions, intertwining religion, identity politics, and national security. In the last decade, violent clashes involving predominantly Fulani herders and farming communities across Nigeria's Middle Belt and Southern regions have left thousands dead, displaced millions, and undermined agricultural productivity (International Crisis Group, 2018; Okoli & Atelhe, 2014). The escalation of these conflicts has generated a multiplicity of narratives, with interpretations ranging from climate-induced migration and governance failures to a deliberate attempt at Islamisation and cultural domination.

The politics of knowledge production around this crisis is as significant as the violence itself. Recurrent narratives inside political rhetoric, news coverage, religious preaching, and everyday conversation have not merely guided public opinion; they have also reshaped policy and redirected diplomatic calculations. Epistemology-concerned with the making, certifying, and contesting of knowledge provides an illuminating vantage point from which the framing of the herdersmen crisis can be scrutinised. Contending accounts represent the violence either as an unintended outcome of ecological and economic pressures or as a deliberate jihadist plot, thus echoing Nigeria's enduring record of religious diversity and ethnic rivalry (Ibrahim, 2020; Eze, 2022).

The present inquiry engages these contestations by testing the plausibility of an Islamisation interpretation. Some social groups view the unrest as a covert religious enterprise, while parallel constituencies label such interpretations as simplistic and partisan. The essay contends that a full apprehension of the crisis can only emerge by embedding these narratives in a wider matrix of governance failures, contestation over land, colonial heritage, and elite manoeuvrings of ethnic and religious identity. Positioning knowledge-production in this broader field, the study helps clarify how discourses surrounding the herdersmen emergency are

configured and deployed within Nigeria's troubled civic and political terrain.

This study is significant because it addresses both the material and epistemic dimensions of the herdersmen insurgency in Nigeria, an issue that has remained understudied in existing scholarship. While numerous works have examined the socio-economic, environmental, and security aspects of the conflict, fewer have interrogated the epistemological politics that shape how the crisis is narrated, understood, and responded to. By analysing competing discourses of the Islamisation agenda, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how religious, political, and media narratives shape public consciousness and state policy. The findings of this study will be valuable to multiple stakeholders. For scholars, it enriches debates on epistemology, conflict studies, and religion in African politics. For policymakers, it highlights the risks of adopting reductionist narratives and underscores the need for evidence-based, inclusive conflict management strategies. For civil society and religious communities, it offers tools to deconstruct polarising discourses and build more dialogic approaches to peace-building. More broadly, this study contributes to rethinking national integration, pluralism, and the prospects of sustainable coexistence in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Nigeria. This study was delimited to Nigeria, with a focus on the period between 2015 and 2024, corresponding to the escalation of herders-farmers conflicts under the administrations of Presidents Muhammadu Buhari and Bola Ahmed Tinubu. The choice of this timeframe reflects both the intensification of violent clashes and the heightened circulation of Islamisation narratives during these years. The study relied on secondary data sources, including media reports, political speeches, policy documents, and scholarly literature. While primary ethnographic research with affected communities would enrich the analysis, this paper limits itself to discourse analysis and critical review due to scope and methodological focus.

Furthermore, the study does not attempt to empirically verify the existence or otherwise of an Islamisation agenda; rather, it interrogates how such narratives are constructed, mobilised, and contested within Nigeria's socio-political landscape. In addition, while regional comparisons with other African countries could provide broader insights, this paper restricts itself to the Nigerian context in order to ensure depth and contextual relevance.

Problem Statement

The herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria has moved from being a localised struggle over resources to a national crisis that threatens social cohesion, food security, and political stability. Yet, beyond the physical violence lies a deeper epistemological crisis: how the conflict is understood, framed, and explained. Some analysts and decision makers insist that the violence originates primarily in ecological conditions: declining soil fertility, advancing desert fronts, and the westward push of animal herders (Blench, 2017; Bukari & Schareika, 2015). Meanwhile, equally influential circles insist that the causes are eschatological, focalising on a supposed strategic Islamisation that seeks to subordinate predominantly Christian regions of the Middle Belt and southwards (Olayoku, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2018). Be stretched towards ranching, grazing reserves, forest-savannah-savanna conversion, or to regional militias and clerical jihad, the prescriptions on offer have become an epiphenomenon of the designer cause labelled most credible and designurable in any given quarter. Complicating matters, control of the terms and symbols of debate is tightly policed, with broadcast outlets elevating and demoting districts of memory according to the electoral balance of resident constituencies. Because the controversy has become a battleground a clash of externally supported social projects and not an index of relatively straightforward mortality or displacement figures, it ends regulated uncertainty, fosters mutual distrust, and circumscribes, and at present, the capacity of Nigero a shared, commmon narrative of the crisis. Without a critical interrogation of how

knowledge about the herdersmen insurgency is constructed and mobilised, responses risk being skewed toward ideological battles rather than practical solutions.

Therefore, the central problem this study addresses is the disjuncture between the structural causes of the herdersmen insurgency such as governance failure, ecological stress, and land tenure crises and the epistemological framings that reduce it to a simplistic Islamisation agenda. This dissonance not only polarises public opinion but also obstructs the formulation of inclusive and effective peacebuilding strategies in Nigeria.

Research Objectives

The overall aim of this study was to interrogate the politics of epistemology surrounding the herdersmen insurgency in Nigeria, with a particular focus on the (im)possibility of the Islamisation agenda. Specifically, the objectives are to:

1. Examine how different epistemic frames political, religious, media, and academic construct knowledge about the herdersmen insurgency in Nigeria.
2. Investigate the historical, ecological, and governance-related factors that underpin the conflict beyond religious interpretations.
3. Analyse the role of political elites, religious leaders, and the media in shaping competing narratives of the insurgency.
4. Assess the implications of framing the conflict as an Islamisation agenda on national security, interfaith relations, and policy responses.
5. Propose alternative knowledge frameworks that can foster inclusive dialogue, reduce polarisation, and promote sustainable peace.

Research Questions

1. How has knowledge about the herdersmen insurgency in Nigeria been constructed and contested across political, media, and religious platforms?

2. What structural and historical factors contribute to the insurgency beyond the dominant Islamisation narrative?
3. In what ways have elites, religious leaders, and the media shaped competing discourses about the conflict?
4. What are the consequences of framing the insurgency as an Islamisation agenda for national cohesion and policy formulation?
5. How can alternative epistemological approaches provide a more balanced and inclusive understanding of the herdersmen insurgency in Nigeria?

Theoretical framework

This study adopted a multi-theoretical framework that combines Framing Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Foucault's Power/Knowledge Paradigm to interrogate the epistemological politics surrounding the herdersmen insurgency in Nigeria. These theories are complementary in explaining how narratives are constructed, legitimised, and contested within socio-political and religious discourses.

Framing Theory: Entman (1993) asserts that the presentation of any issue effectively guides audience interpretation. When conflict takes the stage, the chosen frame accentuates a narrow set of cues from the wider reality, muffling counter-cues and directing both collective perception and subsequent policy in a predictable trajectory. The herdersmen insurgency here exemplifies that mechanism, for the same violence is variously recast as an ecological crash, a cavalcade of national-drama security, or a secretive plot of Islamisation. By closely comparing newspapers, official speeches, and clerical sermons, this book shows how competing accounts-each asserting exclusive access to the truth-either deepen sectarian divides or, by surfacing common vulnerabilities, sustain the possibility of reasoned, if tentative, civic speech.

Postcolonial Theory: Authors such as Said (1978) and Spivak (1990) remind us that the aftereffects of colonial rule eviscerating land and

inventing ethno-religious labels-continue to modulate the coordinates of power and belonging today. In applying their reasoning here, I recover how survey archives and edge-of-the-map designations have given rise to layered epistemic fault-lines that settle like sediment beneath present narrations. The claim of an imminent Islamisation, I argue, energises archives of the Usman dan Fodio jihad and re-centres the colonial framing of a “Muslim North” overlaid crudely across a putatively “Christian South.” Such genealogical labour thus conveys a surplus of insight, in the sense that the very fabrications brought into being in the past now directed widely-discussed judgements of violence and forbearance that continue to radiate through the longitude and latitude of the region's thirty-two years of unsettled contests.

Foucault’s Power/Knowledge Paradigm: Foucault (1980) insists that knowledge is sutured to power: it does not refer to the world but proclaims what may be thought, sensed, and enacted within it. Insurgency, therefore, does not first announce itself in harbor charts or calibers, but pours forth through the multitemporal and multiscale voices of orators and emblems. In the herdersmen insurgency, polished elite cafés, canonically approved clerical mediators, and the ceaseless cycled torrents of hypertext fuse doctrines, fractional data, and grid diagrams into certainties and into trembling. When the Islamisation narrative is subjected to the archaeological-political scrutiny bequeathed by Foucault, it deflates into yet another instance of knowledge becoming the singularly legible surface of state-hatred, of cartographic retraction, and of the layering that consolidates imaginaries of belonging.

Weaving these threads, our analytical net brings taut signal to the tense differential. Framing theory will show which cupped margins of the narrative are planned, burnished, and texted; post-colonial thought will remind us that these margins are darken not by current rage alone but by the sediment of orthographic empire; and the power/knowledge matrix will,

at the end, urge us to pronounce, as both theological and political error, the anataemia of the genealogy of the ‘fact’ stripped of imprint. The resulting triangulation does not allow us to view moral and material registers as conjoined appendices: the insurgency is, and must be understood to be, a pitched contest over episteme, over the currency of legitimacy, and over the delegitimised horizon of the national imprint.

Review of Related Literature

The ongoing violence between farmers and herders in Nigeria has been simplified into three distinct discourses. These are termed resource conflict, identity politics, and religious conflict. At its most basic, resource conflict theory holds that the land, water, and pasture that ‘desertification and climate change’, ecologically, migratory pastoralists and sedentary farmers are fighting over that land (Homer-Dixon, 1999; Abbass, 2012). This explanation ties ‘ecologically’ and ‘pastoralists’ tightly to ‘new’ and ‘clashing.’ Conflict, especially identity and ethnic conflict, Okoli & Atelhe, (2014), ascertained that:

> determined by more than mere resources. The Jabba (Fulani) are frequently caricatured as aggressively cast either as patently distinct and politically influential, or as the conquered victim of the dominant culture. Thus, Identity politics determines the community perception of violence as either ethnic cleansing or community self-defense (p.133).

The civilisational and religious accounts of the conflict is the third frame of analysis. The ‘Islamisation’ thesis and the various jihads in northern Nigeria, as well as the activities of Boko Haram and other extremist organizations today, are the context for the insurgency (Akinwotu, 2021; Ibrahim, 2020). The touch of this frame is crucial but its risk is to gather the world controversy of religion into the mere local fighting over resources.

Understanding the competing narratives relies heavily on epistemology. As noted by Foucault (1980) that:

> Power and knowledge' and the discursive construction of the herdersmen insurgency reveals the power struggles of legitimacy, political control, and cultural dominance. Thus, the 'politics of epistemology' concerns the knowledge and conflict within the circulation of the contested socio-political space of Nigeria (p. 164).

On the material side, research on the herders and farmers conflict has shown the relationships between climate change, the decrease of grazing land, and the migration of herders. Empirical studies have also documented the lack of discourse and material the farmers' conflict (Blench, 2017; Bukari & Schareika, 2015). For instance, desertification in Northern Nigeria has forced pastoralists southwards, intensifying conflicts with farming communities who perceive their lands as under siege.

Other studies emphasise governance failures and weak security institutions. Okoli and Ogayi (2018) argue that:

> the inability of the Nigerian state to regulate grazing routes or enforce ranching policies has enabled the escalation of violence. Similarly, demonstrate how the proliferation of small arms and the politicization of ethnic militias have compounded insecurity.

On the epistemic side, media and political discourse have been shown to frame the conflict in polarizing ways. Olayoku (2014) found that local and national newspapers often deploy ethno-religious frames that amplify fears of Islamisation and cultural domination. Ibrahim (2020) similarly contends that the "Islamisation thesis" has been instrumentalised by political and religious elites to mobilize support, deepen communal suspicions, and justify defensive violence.

Conversely, other empirical works caution against reductionist religious interpretations. International Crisis Group (2018) stresses that while religion and ethnicity shape perceptions, the roots of the conflict lie in structural governance and environmental crises. Adisa and Adekunle (2010)

further argue that framing the violence as a purely religious agenda undermines peacebuilding by ignoring socio-economic and ecological dimensions.

Overall, the empirical literature reveals a duality: while structural realities such as land scarcity, climate change, and governance deficits drive the insurgency, the epistemological framing of the conflict often magnifies religious and identity-based fears, reinforcing the perception of an Islamisation project. This intersection between material causes and epistemic constructions underscores the importance of critically examining how knowledge about the insurgency is produced, circulated, and contested.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design with a focus on critical discourse analysis (CDA) to interrogate the epistemological constructions surrounding the herdersmen insurgency in Nigeria. The design is appropriate because the study was less concerned with quantifying the conflict and more focused on how knowledge about it is produced, circulated, and contested within the public sphere. By examining discursive frames across political, religious, media, and scholarly platforms, the study explored the (im)possibility of interpreting the insurgency as an Islamisation project. The research relied primarily on secondary data, covering the period 2015–2024, when the herders-farmers conflict and Islamisation discourse gained heightened prominence in Nigeria.

Data were drawn from four categories: Political speeches and statements from government officials, political elites, and regional leaders addressing the conflict, religious sermons and communiqués, particularly from Christian associations, Islamic councils, and clerics interpreting the violence in theological terms. Also, media reports and editorials drawn from both national and international newspapers, online platforms, and broadcast media that frame the insurgency, and policy documents and academic

literature including government white papers, NGO reports, and scholarly articles providing analytical interpretations of the conflict.

The study employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) as articulated by Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (1997), focusing on three dimensions: Textual analysis -identifying key words, metaphors, and frames used to construct the insurgency, discursive practice analysis -examining how media, political, and religious institutions reproduce, legitimise, or contest these narratives. And socio-cultural analysis - situating the discourse within Nigeria's broader historical, political, and religious context. The analysis is limited to select Nigerian newspapers such as; The Punch, Vanguard, Daily Trust, The Guardian, key religious communiqués such as Christian Association of Nigeria, Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, and official political statements between 2015 and 2024.

The study did not claim to represent all narratives but aimed to capture dominant discourses that shaped public consciousness. CDA is particularly suited for this study because it bridged epistemology, politics, and conflict studies. It allowed for unpacking how language and power interact in framing the insurgency either as a resource conflict, a security challenge, or an Islamisation agenda. This methodological approach also aligned with the theoretical framework by showing how framing, colonial legacies, and power/knowledge dynamics manifest in Nigerian discourses.

Data Presentation

Political Discourses

Table 1. The Framing of Herdersmen insurgency by the political elites

S/ No	ACTOR	The Mediu m	Frames
1.	President Muhamm adu Buhari	The Nation (2018)	consistently described the crisis as a security and criminality problem, arguing that perpetrators were often "foreign herders" infiltrating Nigeria's porous borders

2.	State Governors (in the Middle Belt)	(Vanguard, 2019).	framed the attacks as a deliberate ethnic and religious project against Christian farming communities. And with the intention of Islamising the nation.
3.	Political opposition parties, (PDP)		Amplified the Islamisation thesis, suggesting that the Buhari administration's perceived inaction reflected tacit support for Fulani expansionism.
4.	President Bola Tinubu,	(2023–2024)	The official discourse shifted toward policy solutions such as ranching, though suspicion of hidden religious motives persisted in public debates.

Religious Discourses

Table 2: The Framing of Herdsmen by Religious Leaders (both Christian and Muslim).

S/ No	Actor	The Outlets	Frames.
1.	The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)	CAN Communiqué (2017)	Frequently described the killings as part of a wider Islamisation agenda, drawing parallels with Boko Haram insurgency.
2.	The Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA)	(Vanguard, 2019).	Dismissed such claims, framing the violence as a resource and economic conflict unrelated to religion.
3.	Independent clerics, particularly from Pentecostal churches,		Often used apocalyptic language to mobilise resistance, against the possible Islamisation agenda.
4.	Islamic scholars	(2023–2024)	Argued that stereotyping Fulani herders as jihadists reproduced harmful biases.

This religious contestation entrenched opposing epistemic camps.

Media Discourses

Table 3: Media coverage reflected sharp epistemological divides.

S/ No	Actor	The Outlets	Frames
1.	Southern-based newspapers	The Punch, Vanguard	Often emphasised religious and ethnic dimensions, framing the conflict as Fulani-driven aggression with potential Islamisation undertones.
2.	Northern-based outlets	Daily Trust, Leadership	Highlighted criminality and governance failures, downplaying religious interpretations.
3.	International media	CNN and BBC,	Largely framed the violence as climate and resource-driven, though occasionally echoing local Islamisation claims.
4.	Editorials and opinion columns		Polarised public perception by selectively amplifying certain frames while neglecting others.

Table 4: Scholarly and Policy Discourses

S/ No	ACTOR	The OUTLETS	FRAMES
1.	Academic literature and NGO	The Punch, Vanguard	Presented more nuanced interpretations. Studies by Okoli and Ogayi (2018), Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin (2018), and International Crisis Group (2018) emphasized structural drivers climate change, land tenure systems, and weak governance. However, some Nigerian scholars acknowledged the persistence of Islamisation fears, noting their deep roots in colonial history and ethno-religious mistrust (Ibrahim, 2020; Eze, 2022). Policy documents proposed ranching, grazing reserves, and community peacebuilding initiatives, though their implementation was hindered by mistrust fueled by Islamisation narratives.

Table 5: Themes in Herdsmen Insurgency Narratives (2015–2024)

Theme	Description	Sample Evidence
State	Media and public discourse	Editorials in national dailies

Failure, Governance Legitimacy Crisis	frame government response as inadequate, portraying government as weak and signalling a breakdown of state authority.	describe the government as 'slow to act' and 'failing its citizens.'
Ethno-Religious Framing	Conflict often framed in ethnic and religious terms, deepening polarisation and mistrust. Highlighting Islamisation agenda.	Reports characterise clashes as 'Fulani attacks on Christian communities,' reinforcing identity divisions and possible Islamisation of the nation.
Militarisation and Securitisation	The state’s preferred approach is increased deployment of security forces, often criticised as reactive and unsustainable.	News coverage highlights military operations and casualty figures but shows little about peacebuilding efforts.
Humanitarian Consequences	Discourse emphasises displacement, loss of livelihoods, and humanitarian crises affecting rural communities.	UN and NGO reports cite over 300,000 internally displaced persons in affected regions.
Policy and Institutional Response	Policy responses, including anti-open grazing laws, are discussed as contested solutions that generate further political debates.	Legislative debates in Benue and Ekiti States show competing narratives about rights, security, and federalism.

Table 6: Thematic Analysis.

Theme/ Category	**Codes**	**Frequency (2015–2024)**	**Interpretation**
Governance Legitimacy Crisis	State failure, weak response, trust deficit	High	Indicates declining public trust in state capacity and legitimacy.
Ethno-Religious	Fulani identity, Christian-Muslim	Moderate to High	Shows how insecurity discourse reinforces

Framing	divide, cultural conflict.		identity/Islamisation politics.
Militarisation & Securitisation	Army deployment, military crackdown, security operations	Consistent	Reveals over-reliance on reactive force rather than preventive measures.
Humanitarian Consequences	Displacement, food insecurity, mass burials	High	Highlights severe socio-economic and humanitarian implications.
Policy Response	Anti-open grazing laws, community policing debates	Moderate	Reflects contested solutions and federal–state power struggles.

Table 7: Textual Analysis

Textual Feature	Example	Implication
Repetition	"Government has failed us" appears across multiple editorials	Strengthens the narrative of state failure and weak governance.
Metaphors	"Ethnic cleansing" used to describe attacks	Intensifies emotional response and frames crisis as existential.
Hyperbole	"Entire communities wiped out overnight"	Magnifies sense of urgency and victimhood.
Quotations from Victims	"We are left at the mercy of killers"	Humanises the conflict and appeals to empathy.

Table 8: Contextual Discursive Strategies

Discursive Strategy	Context of Use	Effect
Blame Allocation	Media and opposition parties attribute failure to federal government	Weakens state legitimacy and fuels political contestation.
Victimisation	Communities framed as helpless victims of state inaction	Generates sympathy and calls for urgent intervention.
Polarisation	Ethnic and religious identities emphasised	Deepens social divides and mistrust.
Appeals to Authority	Use of expert opinions and NGO reports	Strengthens credibility of insecurity narratives.
Call for Policy	Editorials urging ranching	Pressures government to

Change	policies	act and adopt long-term solutions.

Analysis of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that the epistemological contest surrounding the herders-farmers insurgency in Nigeria is less about the empirical reality of an Islamisation project, and more about the discursive power to define the conflict in ways that resonate with political, religious, and cultural constituencies.

The analysis displayed multiplicity of competing epistemologies. It reveals that four epistemic regimes dominate the framing of the crisis:

Type of Epistemology	**Dominate the Framing**	**Comments**
1. Political epistemology	Constructed around securitization, crime, and development challenges.	The coexistence of these epistemologies demonstrates that "truth" about the insurgency is neither singular nor stable, but strategically contested.
2. Religious epistemology	Articulated through existential Christian-Muslim frames, highlighting persecution and Islamisation.	
3. Media epistemology	Fragmented along regional and ownership lines, producing polarized knowledge.	
4.Scholarly/ international epistemology	Emphasising structural drivers such as climate change, land scarcity, and governance deficits.	

While religious leaders, international reports and southern-based media foreground an Islamisation agenda, textual evidence from political speeches, and neutral scholarly works downplays this claim. Instead, the government presents Islamisation as a rhetorical device to mobilise political resistance, Christian solidarity, and international sympathy. The Nigerian state continuously used this as a cover, not minding that it sought international help at a time. This highlights what Foucault (1980) calls the

“politics of truth” -where competing actors circulate knowledge to consolidate influence.

The analysis shows that the Nigerian state often resorts to strategic ambiguity. By avoiding explicit references to religious identity in its framing of the crisis, the government creates space for flexible interpretation. While this reduces the risk of inflaming religious tensions, it simultaneously fuels perceptions of complicity or denial, particularly among Christian constituencies.

Both herders and farmers have also been talked about as victims. In the case of herders, they are described as displaced people suffering from ecological distress. Farmers are also described as victims of terror and religious violence. The dual victimhood accounts makes it more difficult to resolve conflict as every party has some legitimate grievances which perpetuate the cycle of distrust and violence.

The findings highlight a sharp contrast between international organisations, which interpret the crisis through ecological determinism (climate-induced migration, resource scarcity), and local communities, which interpret it through identity and religious frames. This disjuncture illustrates the gap between global knowledge production and local lived realities.

These findings suggest that the discourse of Islamisation cannot be dismissed outright as mere propaganda, nor can it be fully dismissed as it carries tangible empirical inevitability. This should not operate as a political-epistemological weapon that only amplifies insecurities, mobilises constituencies, and complicates peace-building. The study demonstrates that the insurgency should not be understood as a site of epistemic struggle, where political, religious, media, and scholarly actors vie to define the truth of Nigeria’s herders-farmers conflict.

Discussion

This study set out to interrogate the Politics of Epistemology and the Herdersmen Insurgency in Nigeria: The (Im)possibility of Islamisation Agenda. The discussion addresses the research questions one after the other, synthesising findings with literature and theoretical insights. The study found that four epistemological constructions were dominate: political, religious, media, and scholarly/international. These are not merely descriptive; they are situation charged frameworks for defining the conflict. Political discourses prioritise security, development, and governance, while religious discourses construct the crisis as persecution and Islamisation. Media accounts are polarised along regional and ownership lines, often reinforcing suspicion, while scholarly and international bodies emphasise ecological and structural drivers. This finding corroborates Foucault's (1980) assertion that knowledge is bound up with power; whoever controls the narrative influences the policy and moral legitimacy of the conflict. It also echoes Akinyele (2020), who argued that the crisis is as much a battle of meanings as of material resources.

The discourse of Islamisation emerges with little empirically verifiable project that should not be seen as a rhetorical strategy mobilised by southern-based media and Christian organisations. It is strategically useful in framing farmers as existential victims and in drawing international Christian solidarity. However, evidence from government, neutral scholarship, and international agencies tends to highlight socio-economic and ecological drivers. This aligns with Mamdani's (1996) caution against reducing African conflicts to "religious binaries" without considering historical and political economies. The Islamisation thesis, therefore, reflects what Said (1978) described in Orientalism: the reproduction of fear-laden religious categories to explain political violence.

The government's framing strategy is one of strategic ambiguity. By avoiding religiously explicit terminology, it attempts to prevent escalation of tensions. However, this silence generates mistrust and accusations of

complicity, especially from Christian communities and International Community. This finding resonates with Habermas' (1989) public sphere theory, which stresses that when governments fail to provide transparent communication, alternative epistemic actors such as media, religious leaders step in to fill the vacuum, often in polarising ways.

Both herders and farmers are constructed as victims. Herders are cast as displaced populations driven by desertification, while farmers are represented as victims of terrorism and cultural/religious domination. These competing victimhood narratives reinforce cycles of grievance and delegitimise reconciliation efforts. This reflects Goffman's (1974) frame analysis, where conflicting identity frames prevent shared understanding of the crisis. It also echoes Adamu (2021), who noted that dual victimhood in communal conflicts exacerbates cycles of vengeance.

A key finding is the divergence between local and international discourses. International bodies emphasise ecological and structural drivers such as climate change, migration, weak governance, while local actors emphasise religious and identity-based framings. This tension highlights the gap between global epistemologies and lived realities. Theoretically, this reflects Spivak's (1988) "epistemic violence," where global knowledge systems often silence subaltern voices. International framings risk erasing the religious fears of local communities, while local framings risk overlooking structural causes visible in comparative and data-driven analyses.

The discussion illustrates that the herders–farmers insurgency is not only a conflict over land and resources, but also a struggle over meaning, legitimacy, and epistemic authority. The Islamisation discourse operates beyond political epistemology to a proven agenda. The Nigerian state's strategic ambiguity, local dual victimhood narratives, and the international-local framing gap all contribute to the persistence of the crisis.

Conclusions

This study examined the politics of epistemology in the framing of the Nigerian herders-farmers insurgency, interrogating the (im)possibility of an Islamisation agenda. Several conclusions emerge:

The insurgency is constructed through multiple epistemologies: political, religious, media, scholarly, and international. These discourses are not neutral; they reflect competing claims of authority and legitimacy. The Islamisation narrative functions beyond a discursive construct mobilised by political and religious actors to show slit empirically verified agenda. It is more than symbolic power that risks trivialising the dispute. The Nigerian state's silence and avoidance of religious framing is a deliberate policy of conflict avoidance. Yet, this silence aggravates public suspicion, particularly in the Christian circles, which interpret silence as collaboration.

Both herders and farmers are discourse victims, producing grievance cycles which make reconciliation impossible. The dual narratives of victimhood increase animosity. The international perceptions (structural/ecological) and local perceptions (religious/identity) are starkly disjunct. This gap risks making peace building attempts either too simplistic or too multilayered. Ultimately, the study argues that the insurgency is sustained not only by the material factors (land scarcity, weak governance, and climate change) but also by a war of meanings -epistemic struggles which are overshadowed by the more prominent instruments of war.

Recommendations

The study among other findings recommend the following:

1. The Nigerian state must adopt clear, transparent communication strategies that acknowledge religious sensitivities while grounding the conflict in structural and socio-economic realities. Silence breeds mistrust; clarity fosters legitimacy.

2. Peace-building must recognise both religious identity concerns and ecological drivers. Ignoring either dimension produces incomplete solutions. A dual-track approach is necessary.

3. Nigerian media houses should be encouraged to reduce inflammatory reporting through regulatory guidelines and journalist training in conflict-sensitive reporting. Media literacy campaigns should also empower citizens to critically assess conflict narratives.

4. Interfaith and intercommunal dialogues facilitated by civil society and traditional leaders should be institutionalised. These must be locally owned but supported by government and international partners.

5. Federal and state governments must invest in grazing reserves, irrigation farming, and climate adaptation strategies that address the root ecological causes of displacement and resource competition.

References

Ademola-Adelehin, B., & Kwaja, C. M. A. (2018). Response to herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria: *Mapping and mis-mapping of policy actors.* Search for Common Ground. https://www.sfcg.org

Akinwotu, E. (2021, June 23). *Nigeria's herder–farmer conflict:* A climate or religious war? The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com

Albert, I. O. (2018). Herdsmen–farmer conflicts and security in Nigeria: An analysis of causes and consequences. *Journal of Social Sciences and Policy Review, 10(2),* 15–32.

Blench, R. (2017). Pastoralism in Nigeria: Understanding drivers and dynamics of herders–farmers conflicts. *Review of African Political Economy, 44(154),* 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2017.1367910

Campbell, J. (2018). Nigeria: The herder-farmer violence is spreading south. Council on Foreign Relations. https://www.cfr.org

Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). (2017). Communiqué on the herdsmen killings. Abuja: CAN Secretariat.

Eze, G. O. M. (2022). Discourses of insecurity and governance legitimacy in Nigeria: *The herdsmen insurgency revisited. African Security Review, 31(4),* 457–476. https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2022.2056789

International Crisis Group. (2018). Stopping Nigeria’s spiralling farmer–herder violence (Africa Report No. 262). https://www.crisisgroup.org

Ibrahim, J. (2020). The herders–farmers conflict and the question of Islamisation in Nigeria. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies, 38(3),* 389–408. https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2020.1715312

Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA). (2018). Statement on the herdsmen crisis. Abuja: NSCIA Secretariat.

Okoli, A. C., & Ogayi, C. O. (2018). Herdsmen militancy and humanitarian crisis in Nigeria: A theoretical briefing. *African Security Review, 27(2),* 129–143. https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2018.1479818

Daily Trust. (2018, March 15). *Herders–farmers clashes:* Beyond religion. Daily Trust Newspaper. https://www.dailytrust.com.ng

Punch Editorial Board. (2019, February 7). *Stop the herdsmen killings now.* The Punch Newspaper. https://punchng.com

Vanguard News. (2019, May 6). PDP accuses Buhari government of pursuing Islamisation agenda. Vanguard Newspaper. https://www.vanguardngr.com